

Introduction: Roman Emperors and the Divine – Shifts and Downshifts

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In the course of history, the divine sphere has frequently been harnessed to serve the needs of political leaders. Political power has thus been legitimized as authorized by divine forces. In pre-modern societies, and especially in the Roman Empire, phenomena that people today call religion and politics were closely intertwined, even inseparable.¹ This can be perceived most clearly in the relationship of the Roman emperors to the divine – in their support of different deities, in their role as the mediators between the divine and humankind, and in their policies towards the many different cults and religious groups across a vast Empire. The manifestation of proximity to the divine was one of the most important ways of legitimating imperial power.

The articles of the present volume *Emperors and the Divine* analyse the various means by which imperial power was justified. Emperors supported cults of various deities, representing themselves as the guardians of the cosmic order, whether the fragile peace maintained between the human and divine spheres was a *pax deorum* or *pax dei*. They aimed to sustain and increase their authority as representatives of the divine, either as the companions and protégés of important gods or as (more or less) divine beings themselves. In this book, we will learn about the various ways in which the gods, including the Christian deity, were used for political purposes. Moreover, it will be asked how Roman emperors were made divine. Were they really regarded as gods? We will analyse how conceptions of the emperor as a representative of the divine sphere evolved from the Early Imperial Period to Late Antiquity, proceeding from Augustus to Constantine and the Christian emperors, and even to the rulers of the New Kingdoms. How did the titulature develop and what do these changes tell us about the encounter of religion and politics (if we abide by the use of these modern terms)? Furthermore, we will investigate how different individuals and groups, especially Christian groups, coped with this issue of emperors and the divine.

The articles of the volume *Emperors and the Divine* originate from the conference papers that were presented during a multi-disciplinary symposium at the Helsinki

¹ This has been pointed out in numerous contributions. For recent examples, see Galinsky 2011, 5–6; Friesen 2011, 24–25; Várhelyi 2010; Lenski 2009, 9–10; Gradel 2002, 5–6.

Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki in January 2014. The organization of the symposium was based on the idea that exchanges between scholars who share similar interests and a fascination with the ancient Roman world but differ in their approaches may possibly engender important cross-disciplinary dialogue. Consequently, *Emperors and the Divine* brings together scholars from a range of different disciplines – ancient history, the classics, comparative literature, archaeology, comparative religion, Biblical studies, church history and Roman law – to discuss common problems in the research of Roman emperors. Moreover, this volume combines the insights of scholars who work on the earlier Imperial Period and the later Imperial Period (Late Antiquity), research fields that too often tend to be approached as separate entities. Despite the diversity of the disciplinary approaches, the articles of this volume revolve around the theme of the Roman emperors' relationship with the divine sphere. Combining scholarly discussions on the Early Imperial Period with those on Late Antiquity also offers a potential to analyse the gradual shifts from the early Empire to the Christian Empire in a diachronic and more subtle way.

Emperors and the Empire as an Imagined Community

The Roman Empire was an imagined community in the sense that most of the people who inhabited it did not know most of the people who belonged to it. They nonetheless considered themselves members of the same community, and they associated themselves with it.² It has often been noted that the Roman Empire was such a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural amalgamation that the only things that unified its myriads of villages, towns and cities were the emperor and the obligation to pay taxes. The taxation systems varied according to manifold contracts that the subjected communities had made with the Roman conquerors. At least theoretically, therefore, the person of the emperor was the most unifying factor in the whole Empire.

Roman imperial power exercised its supremacy not only through military might and violence, but also by means of religious practices. Religion was one of the most prominent ways in which the Roman social and political order was construed and maintained.³ Roman supremacy was represented as divine in origin. In this order of things, an appropriate relationship with the divine and a correct interpretation of the divine were crucial in governing the Roman commonwealth.⁴

² For imagined communities, see Anderson 1991.

³ For the dynamics between imperial power and provinces, see Ando 2000. For the role of religious practices in these relations, see Várhelyi 2010, 213.

⁴ Elm 2012, 1–2 has shown how governing the *oikoumene* was seen in connection with a correct reading of the divine will and, especially during the Christian Empire, with a proper understanding of the nature of the divine.

In the Imperial Period, the welfare of the commonwealth was connected with the emperor, and the concept of *salus Augusti*, the personal health of the emperor, was associated with public welfare (*salus publica*).⁵ Therefore, much was invested in the person of the emperor. His position was increasingly articulated and performed in cultic terms, as seen especially in the growing importance of the emperor's role in the sacrificial system. The rule of Augustus set a precedent in connecting the power and primacy of the emperor with memberships in the all-important priestly colleges and especially with the status of *pontifex maximus*.⁶

Divine Companions and Divine Emperors

Imperial power was not automatically stable. It had to be continuously negotiated and legitimated at every level of law-making and government. The new rule of emperors turned to the divine sphere to legitimize their power. In this sense, they did not operate in a cultural vacuum but built on earlier Roman cultic and social structures. The same applied to Emperor Constantine and his Christian successors. The legitimation of power functioned on many levels, and imperial power had to conform to many already established rules and conventions of Roman society.⁷

Imperial authority was reinforced with the rhetoric of public welfare. As repeatedly asserted by verbal and visual means,⁸ the order and welfare of the Empire – and even the whole of humankind – was based on the maintenance of good relations with the divine (*pax deorum* or *pax dei*). The emperors represented themselves as the guardians of these proper relations on behalf of the community, and it was the main responsibility of the emperor to ensure the benevolence of the divine forces towards the commonwealth. We could thus speak of the maintenance of public security or “national security”, and although this term is anachronistic, it illustrates well the significance of divine peace for ancient societies. We should not take the maintenance of good relations with the divine in Greco-Roman and Christian Antiquity only as a “religious” issue.⁹ The continuity of ancient thought according to which the emperor must display intimate ties to a divine *comes* (or ‘companion’) can also be seen in Emperor Constantine's forging of relations with various divinities.

⁵ Várhelyi 2010, 207.

⁶ Gordon 1990, 206; Várhelyi 2010, 1, 211; Knust & Várhelyi 2011, 15. See also the contribution by Alan Cameron in this volume.

⁷ For the many dimensions of the legitimation of power, see Beetham 1991, 15–16. For Emperor Septimius Severus and his legitimation strategies, see the article by Jussi Rantala in this volume.

⁸ In anachronistic terms, this could be called imperial propaganda. Whether the word ‘propaganda’ should be applied to imperial self-fashioning and representation has, however, been debated in scholarship: for a survey, see Enenkel & Pfeijffer 2005, 1–9 and Weber & Zimmermann 2003, 11–32.

⁹ The term “national security” is used by Drake 2008, 460; Drake 2011, 198.

The emperor himself could also become a divine being.¹⁰ The concept of god in the Greco-Roman worldview diverged considerably from modern notions. Gods were regarded as immortal and had supernatural powers, but there were many kinds of deities – both major and minor gods with greater and lesser powers – in the divine hierarchy. There were, so to speak, different degrees of being a god. Divinity could be ascribed to special humans, for instance, if she or he had acquired exceptional powers and virtues and performed miracles. It was believed that divine elements existed everywhere in nature, in the cosmos and even in a human being.¹¹

A number of cults could be organized for an emperor after his death, often in connection with the cults of other gods. There was not one centrally steered imperial cult, but rather, as Karl Galinsky puts it, a “vast panorama of variegated local practices that comprise the umbrella phenomenon that we call ‘the imperial cult’”.¹² Therefore, it would be more fitting to speak of imperial cults in the plural.¹³ The various forms of emperor worship were an important way for provincials, especially in the East, to maintain good relations with the central government of the Empire. Nonetheless, it is imperative to stress that emperor worship by no means dominated all religious and societal life in the Empire.¹⁴

Christians principally acknowledged that, in addition to the Christian deity, beings existed in the world who could also be regarded as divine to a minor degree: for instance, angels and redeemed humans, especially martyrs and saints.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the divinity of the Roman emperor and the worship paid to the emperor caused problems for Christians.¹⁶

In the course of the shift to Christianity after Constantine, the veneration of emperors was continued by Christian subjects, albeit often – but not always – in modified forms in which animal sacrifices were omitted. As Arnaldo Momigliano's puts it, “it is not difficult to see that the Christian emperors were in no hurry to eliminate the imperial cult.”¹⁷ A Christian emperor had to legitimate his power with the divine presence as intensely as his “pagan” predecessors. What was different was the notion that the emperor, as Noel Lenski aptly notes, “downshifted from the embodiment of the sacred to the conduit to it”.¹⁸ The emperor was no longer officially

10 For the emperor's funerals and the procedures of making him a god, see Arce 2000, 115–129.

11 West 1999, 38; Frede 1999, 43–59. As Price 1984a, 79–82 stresses, there was no generally accepted definition of what a deity was or what it took to become a god. See also Gradel 2002, 28.

12 Galinsky 2011, 3. This is why Beard, North & Price 1998, 348 have emphatically stated that there was “no such thing as ‘the imperial cult’”. See also van Andringa's article in this volume.

13 As suggested, for instance, by Friesen 2011, 24.

14 Price 1984b; Galinsky 2011, 4–6.

15 For the Christian views of divine beings, see West 1999, 38; Frede 1999, 43–59.

16 The problems faced by Christians are discussed in the contributions by Tobias Georges and Outi Lehtipuu in this volume.

17 Momigliano 1986, 191.

18 Lenski 2009, 9–10. See also Galinsky 2011, 15.

a god, but he was still a representative of the divine sphere for his people. Another matter is how the ordinary people understood this subtle difference, indeed there was a great deal of room for ambiguity in the veneration of the emperor, as in many other religious issues in Late Antiquity.¹⁹

From Loyalty and Flattery to Criticism and Mockery

Emperors and the Divine is divided into five sections. Section 1 discusses the divine honours received by the Roman emperors. William Van Andringa starts the first section and the whole volume with the article “Honours Worthy of a God: On the ‘Imperial Cult’ in the Reigns of Augustus and Constantine”, in which he examines the ambiguity of the religious language connected with the divine honours that Roman emperors received from Augustus onwards. Stressing the overlapping of the domains of politics and religion, Van Andringa explains the cult of the Roman emperor in the context of a religion that mixed a public cult with the functioning of the civic community. Rites and sacrifices were centred on the emperor and the gods who accompanied him. Van Andringa draws attention to the persistence of imperial ceremonies in the Christian Empire, and he interprets this continuity as confirmation of the ambiguities associated with the cult of emperors.

The other two contributions of the first section take us to the documentary evidence, papyri and inscriptions on the emperors and the divine. In her article “Emperor Meets Gods: Divine Discourse in Greek papyri from Roman Egypt”, Janneke de Jong discusses the different ways in which Roman emperors are presented in divine contexts in Greek papyrus texts from Egypt. This “imperial discourse” – meaning the totality of these expressions, both visual and verbal, made by both emperors and subjects in the form of one-way messages or dialogues – was one of the means of expressing and justifying Roman rule to the Empire's widely diverging population. Applying a discourse approach, de Jong offers a new perspective to divine language in papyrus texts, showing that the use of divine language was more than a verbal elevation of the emperor and demonstrating that imperial titulature was both a product of, and a constructive element contributing to, the confirmation and reinforcement of the imperial power position. Thus, imperial titles were not only a significant tool for evoking divine associations, but changing titulature also illustrated important developments in imperial presentation.

Mika Kajava's article “Gods and Emperors at Aigeai in Cilicia” discusses the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor, analysing a number of altars and their dedicatory inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions are unpublished (D10, E14). Kajava shows that these dedicatory inscriptions testify to various local methodologies of jointly honouring the Roman emperors and their family members with local deities, and he undertakes a close analysis of the term ‘Sebastoi’, which appears in one of the inscriptions.

19 The ambiguities are discussed in the articles by William Van Andringa and Maijastina Kahlos in this volume.

Section 2 examines the ways in which emperors legitimated their position as well as the ways in which their divine status was questioned. In his essay “Gods of Cultivation and Food Supply in the Imperial Propaganda of Septimius Severus”, Jussi Rantala investigates the relationship between legitimizing imperial power and gods involved with cultivation, grain and food supply in Roman imperial propaganda during the reign of Septimius Severus. Analysing numismatic and literary evidence as well as inscriptions, Rantala shows how Annona, Ceres and Tellus were used to legitimize the power of Septimius Severus in the different periods of the emperor’s reign. Annona, the goddess symbolizing the imperial food supply, was connected with wars and other crises when the food supply of the capital often came under threat. When Severus returned to Rome, more emphasis was put on Tellus, a traditional goddess of agriculture and a deity connected with the Golden Age. Rantala also discusses the Secular Games (*ludi saeculares*) organized during the reign of Septimius Severus.

Whereas Rantala analyses imperial propaganda, Tobias Georges offers a detailed investigation of the critical voices during the Early Imperial Period. In his article “Tertullian’s Criticism of the Emperors’ Cult in the *Apologeticum*”, Georges focuses on chapters 28–35 of that work, in which Tertullian strongly criticizes the emperors’ cult. Tertullian bases his argumentation on the concept of *maiestas*, drawing a categorical distinction between God and man. Tertullian acknowledges the emperors’ *maiestas*, but only as far as it is understood as a human being’s majesty subordinated to the *maiestas* of the one God. Georges shows that at the same time, Tertullian needed to underline the Christians’ loyalty towards the emperors and, accordingly, the specific kind of reverence that was still their due. According to Tertullian, Christians venerated emperors in the right way by praying for them, swearing by their *salus* and emphasizing their humanity.

The articles in section 3 examine how the divinity of the emperor influenced Christian identity formation both before and after the Constantinian shift. In her article “‘What Harm Is There for You to Say Caesar Is Lord?’ – Emperors and the Imperial Cult in Early Christian Stories of Martyrdom”, Outi Lehtipuu examines what kind of role the emperors played in early Christian narratives of martyrdom. She takes a sceptical stance towards the first-hand documentary nature of the earliest martyrologies (such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *Acts of Justin and his Companions* and *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*), arguing that their conventional, literary style and intertextual links with other martyr accounts show that they should be treated as literary products rather than documentary material.

Maijastina Kahlos’s article discusses the ways in which the sacredness of the emperors was reinterpreted in the fourth and fifth centuries, during the long process in which the Empire was gradually Christianized. The Christian emperors expected to receive due reverence as before, and imperial images retained the associations and connotations of prestige, authority and divinity that they had earlier had. Kahlos’s analysis of fourth- and fifth-century Christian writers reveals a wide variety of attitudes towards emperor worship, depending on the socio-political

context of the writings, as seen, for instance, in the case of John Chrysostom’s homilies in connection with the Riot of Statues in Antioch in 387.

The contributions in section 4 analyse aspects of imperial authority in the religious sphere – in the fates of the title *pontifex maximus* as well as in ordering divine knowledge. Alan Cameron examines in his article the development of the imperial title *pontifex maximus* from Emperor Augustus (12 BCE) to Emperor Gratian (382 CE), and he argues for the transformation of the title into that of *pontifex inclitus* after Gratian. Cameron reinforces his argument with a thorough analysis of imperial titulatures. The title *pontifex maximus* formed a permanent element in the imperial titlature and was usually given priority in the list of titles. The prestige of the office was high, even though its actual powers were limited. Cameron demonstrates that the title *pontifex maximus* was changed to *pontifex inclitus* because Christian emperors were anxious to downplay the pagan associations connected with it but unwilling to give up their traditional claim to priestly authority.

Imperial authority is also an essential element in Caroline Humfress’s article “Ordering Divine Knowledge in Late Roman Legal Discourse”, which explores how relations between the human and divine were structured and ordered in the *Codex Theodosianus*, the Imperial codex of Emperor Theodosius II (in 438). Humfress widens the recent research on power and knowledge in the Roman Empire (see, for example, *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, edited by J. König and T. Whitmarsh 2007) by suggesting that the *Codex Theodosianus* is to be understood as a work of Roman imperial knowledge-ordering. She analyses how knowledge about the divine was textualized in Book XVI of the *Codex Theodosianus*. The compilers subsumed a myriad of different religious practices within a structure capable of rationalization. The new legal taxonomies in the title of Book XVI – “pagans”, “Jews, Caelicolists and Samaritans” and “heretics” – were soon reapplied in Novel 3.1 by Theodosius II.

The last section is dedicated to literature and examines the two ways in which emperors are treated there: with praise and with mockery. Poets and rhetoricians not only knew how to write praises of emperors, but they were also capable of satire. Chiara O. Tommasi Moreschini’s contribution “Coping with Ancient Gods, Celebrating Christian Emperors, Proclaiming Roman Eternity: Rhetoric and Religion in Late Antique Latin Panegyrics” provides a thorough analysis of the various strategies used by the Latin poets of the fifth and sixth centuries to deal with the emperor’s divine status. Tommasi shows how old models continued to survive, despite being incorporated into a new context, in the exaltation of Rome and its emperors. She argues that the ritual of apotheosis (*relatio in numerum divorum*) underwent a profound transformation in which divinity came to be understood “as if the function only, and not the person of the emperor, were endowed with divine power”. Furthermore, Tommasi shows that late antique panegyric was a living and changing literary form, which was rooted in the Roman pagan past and transformed into a sophisticated, relevant and effective form of political interaction.

As opposed to the glorification of Roman emperors in ancient and late antique panegyric, satirical narratives mocked and subverted the authority of divine rulers. Sari Kivistö's article "Satirical Apotheosis in Seneca and Beyond" closes the volume with an analysis of the motif of apotheosis in these satirical narratives. Kivistö uses as the starting point Seneca's ancient satirical work *Apocolocyntosis Divi Claudii*, in which the death of Emperor Claudius and his ascent to heaven finally leads to his expulsion and exile to the underworld. Kivistö focuses on the later Neo-Latin tradition, which was inspired by Seneca's work. These later works also describe in the satirical spirit otherworldly journeys, ascents to heaven or descents to the underworld by rulers, theologians, heroes and poets. The satirical representations of apotheosis are based on reversal and subversion through which the mighty lose their worldly positions. No one can triumph over death, not even the world's most powerful.

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